WORLD DESIGNATIONS

World Heritage Site

Mammoth Cave National Park was authorized by Congress in 1926 and was established July 1, 1941, to protect and preserve the natural environment within its boundaries. It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

On October 27, 1991, Mammoth Cave National Park joined the ranks of renowned places like Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Egypt's Pyramids of Giza, Nepal's Kathmandu Valley, and India's Taj Mahal Historic Park. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Mammoth Cave National Park as a World Heritage Site for its exceptional natural features, its habitat for threatened and endangered species, and its association with events and persons of world historic and archeological significance.

Mammoth Cave National Park, unlike many sites on the list, is known for its natural heritage as well as its cultural heritage. Mammoth Cave is the most extensive cave system in the world, with more than 345 surveyed miles of cave passageways. Carbonate and sulfate mineral deposits decorate portions of the cave with a great variety of forms. Over 200 species from many animal groups have been found in the cave and more than 25 of these only live in underground environments.

Fossils of prehistoric creatures such as brachiopods, crinoids, and corals are found throughout the Mississippian-age rock that makes up the cave.

The park's association with humans began nearly 12,000 years ago. Pre-columbian Indians identified from four cultural periods (Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian) occupied the park and its environs. People from the Early Woodland Period are particularly significant because they were the first to practice organized horticulture in North America. Some of these people entered the cave and collected minerals from the walls and sediment. These people explored further into Mammoth Cave than any other cave in the world - over three miles distant from any probable point of entry.

International Biosphere Reserve

On February 7, 1990, Mammoth Cave National Park again gained prestigious international status when UNESCO designated the Mammoth Cave area as a unit of the international Network of Biosphere Reserves to assess the effects of human manipulations upon the area.

Biosphere reserves are important or unique natural environments where conservation and sustained use of the natural resources are combined. They represent specific types of ecosystems such as deserts, semi-deserts, tropical grasslands and temperate deciduous woodlands. These special areas are targets for research, monitoring, and education. Cooperation among government policy makers, scientists, and local citizens is of primary importance to the system in order to ensure the conservation of the regional culture, its environments and resources.

Mammoth Cave National Park has become a key area for international research on karst hydrology and cave ecosystems. The biosphere reserve, which includes the watershed area south of the park known as the sinkhole plain, encompasses 60,000 acres.

The surface landscape is dominated by a mixed hardwood forest with 84 species of trees. The Big Woods, a 307-acre stand of fragmented old growth forest, is an example of the grandeur that all of Mammoth Cave National Park will someday possess.

Green River, designated a significant free-flowing stream, bisects the park from east to west and provides habitat for 84 species of fish, 47 species of freshwater mussels, and many other invertebrates. The Green River is intimately connected with the sinkhole plain and the underground streams where water resurges at several large springs. The lack of surface drainage combined with enclosed valleys, sinkholes and caves makes this Biosphere Reserve one of the world's classic karst areas.

The cooperation among the entities to manage the land and water resources to meet human

needs while conserving natural resources is one of the most important goals of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Program.

Continuous resource monitoring, and environmental education will teach us how the ecosystems work, how we are changing them and how to keep the ecosystems and the societies that depend on them healthy.